Professor Gopi Chand Narang on India's *tehzeeb*

CHECKING IN

'Bollywood has helped popularise Urdu'

SUAVE, sophisticated and soft-spoken, Professor Gopi Chand Narang is a listener's delight. A shining star in the galaxy of contemporary Urdu litterateurs, the vice-chairperson of the Sahitya Akademi has, apart from grooming a whole generation of Urdu scholars at the Jamia Millia Islamia and Delhi University, also written numerous critically acclaimed books on the Urdu language, its origins and poetic beauty. Actively involved in promoting Urdu, Narang fiercely defends its secular character. Hailed as an *aashiq* of Urdu, Narang is equally popular in Urdu-reading circles in India and Pakistan. Never missing an opportunity to expose the myth that Urdu was responsible for Partition, he calls the language a symbol of India's *Ganga-Jumni tehzeeb* (composite culture). On Thursday, Nehru Centre invited Narang for a lecture on *Urdu Language and Culture: Past, Present and Future*. Moments before his lecture, **MOHAMMED WAJIHUDDIN** met Narang for an interview.

Excerpts:

■ On whether Urdu created Pakistan

Urdu's eclectic, secular character rejects the narrow, sectarian two-nation theory. When the movement for Pakistan picked up, some of its leaders misused this language to serve their interests. After Partition, Pakistan declared Urdu its national language since it desperately needed a link language, being linguistically divided among Punjabis, Sindhis and Pushtos. Urdu discourages communalism and enhances harmony.

■ On Pakistan monopolising Urdu

For the last 52 years, Pakistan has tried to give the impression that it is the sole reservior of Urdu. It conveniently forgets that only a minuscule minority there, mostly *mohajirs* (those who immigrated from India) speak Urdu while in India it's the mother tongue of around 6 crore people. The Pakistan embassy in London tells BBC not to appoint Indian Muslims for its Urdu service, since "only Pakistanis know the languge well." Almost all major Pakistani Urdu writers — Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, Intezar Hussain, to name a few — have supported India's belief in pluralism, democracy and secularism. If someone attempted to Islamise Urdu, he failed miserably because Urdu is not slave to Islam. Most of its poets and writers have penned blasphemous verses and prose, which is anathema to the monolithic Islam.

■ On Urdu's status in India

After Partition, Urdu suffered a lot, especially in the Hindi heartland. The reorganisation of Indian states was held on the grounds of language. So Gujarati got Gujarat, Marathi got Maharashtra, Bengali got West Bengal. Likewise, other regional languages got their states. Urdu, which was widely spoken, didn't get a state and was therefore deprived of state patronage. It appeared in the eighth schedule of the Constitution, but was left high and dry as policy makers discriminated against it. It was systematically driven out of schools in Uttar Pradesh, which was once its home.

Gopi Chand Narang

■ On the three-language formula

For the north Indian states the central government made a three-language formula which says that at primary stage a student has to study Hindi, English and Sanskrit. We have no grudge against learning Hindi, which is a national language. But there should be a provision for learning Urdu as well.

■ On the Hindi-Urdu clash

There is no clash between Hindi and Urdu. Both are sister languages and have enriched India's culture immensely. Tell me what picture will India present minus its Amir Khusroo, Kabir, Nanak, Raskhan and Tukaram? Urdu is the repository of that great culture which makes India a pluralist society. It's not the language of a particular religion, though the majority of its practitioners are Muslims for historical reasons. Why do people associate Urdu with *madrasas*? Madrasas are for religious teachings, not for teaching *shairi, nazm, ghazal* and *afsanas* (stories).

■ On Mumbai's contribution to Urdu

Mumbai, especially Bollywood, has helped in popularising Urdu. Today, NRIs in Canada, Europe, America and Australia listen to Jagjit Singh and Lata Mangeshkar. Mumbai nurtured writers like Ismat Chugtai, Manto, Ali Sardar Jafri, Majrooh Sultanpuri and Kaifi Azmi. Urdu can regain its lost ground provided our policy makers give up their narrow agenda.